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**“I refuse these givens:” Reintegrating the Split Self in the Poetry of**

**H.D. and Adrienne Rich**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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“I refuse these givens:” Reintegrating the Split Self in the  
Poetry of H.D. and Adrienne Rich

In their poetry, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Adrienne Rich investigate and critique the traditional perception that language is first and foremost the province of men. They explore the implications of this perception on women writers and envision new ways for women to claim language and assert their voices. Although they were born in different times, they followed similar paths in their personal lives and as authors. Both were born into middle class families in the Eastern United States; H.D. (b. 1886) grew up in Pennsylvania, and Rich (b. 1929) grew up in Baltimore. Both had science professor fathers who encouraged their daughters to read and excel in school. Both had mothers (strangely enough, named Helen) who had given up artistic careers in order to support their husbands. Both received good educations—H.D. was a student at Bryn Mawr College but did not graduate, and Rich excelled at and graduated from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Both entered into heterosexual marriages that ended in divorce, and then turned to homosexual relationships.<sup>i</sup> Both wrote more traditional verse at the beginning of their careers and gradually began writing more overtly feminist work as they got older. Finally, both women expressed a feeling of divided identity and attempted to unify the divisions they experienced through their poetry.

This divided identity comes from the poets' perception that literature, and the act of writing in particular, is considered masculine. Many realities about the literary canon contribute to this perception—most notably, the canon's tendency to consist primarily of male writers. Only recently has gender diversity become a valued facet of a literary

curriculum, in large part because of the women's movement of which Rich was a part. Even today, it is unlikely for students to study many female authors in a survey course that covers the most "important" or influential authors of a time period. Women's writing is still often thought of as a subcategory of literature, and it is only slowly becoming more recognized. When H.D. and Rich studied literature in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, they learned and were influenced by poets who were almost all male, and this experience shaped their understanding of themselves as authors. In a commencement address she gave at Smith College in 1979, Rich told the graduates that "the ideology of the education you just spent four years acquiring in a women's college has been largely, if not entirely, the ideology of white male supremacy, a construct of male subjectivity."<sup>ii</sup> She felt that the education system largely ignored or denied female voices, and taught female students to deny their own.

Moreover, the very language we use to talk about and understand literature is influenced by this gender bias. In *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker describes the way that our language of literary criticism is gendered. She writes that "[t]he metaphor of the pen as the penis has a long literary history," and, in the same vein, writing has often been described as ejaculation (3). Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, wrote that he hoped he could produce "spermatic," "man-making words" (3). The literature that we value the most in our society is similarly described as masterly, powerful, or penetrating, thus linking serious writing with male sexuality. Moreover, influential critics such as Harold Bloom have explained the process of becoming an author in exclusively male terms. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, he describes the struggle of a young author to establish himself as independent

from the writers who have influenced him as a “[b]attle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads” (11). The fact that Bloom refers to both the new poet and the predecessor as male is not just for convenience, or an attempt to use male pronouns to refer to “mankind” universally; Bloom suggests that this is specifically a process of the assertion of paternity. Critics and authors who use these popular metaphors figure authorship as a kind of fatherhood; if the pen is the penis and the words are seminal fluid, then the author *fathers* the text.

This is certainly not to say that in the history of literature, there have been no women writers of any importance—since Sappho in ancient Greece and surely before her, women have laid claim to authorship in diverse and important ways. Even critics like Bloom, who have been heavily criticized by feminists as sexist, accept that “strong” female poets have existed.<sup>iii</sup> It is to say, however, that when a woman writes, she has to contend with the perception that she is doing something unwomanly. This perception that writing is unwomanly is evident in the trends that can be observed in criticism of women’s poetry. Historically, and certainly in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when H.D. and Rich were starting their writing careers, women’s poetry was often criticized under the assumption that writing is inherently masculine. Women were either praised for writing in a way that did not reveal their gender—that is, for being good writers in spite of being women—or for writing modestly and delicately—that is, for being good women in spite of being writers. Criticism of H.D.’s work falls into the first category; her early short imagist works were compared to Pound, her sometimes fiancé, although she was not regarded as his literary equal. Later in her career as her work became much more overtly feminist and much more obviously written by a woman, she received far less

critical acclaim. Today, a few of her early poems, such as “Oread” and “Heat,” are moderately well known, although not nearly as well known as the poetry of her male contemporaries. However, her late feminist works, such as *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*, are rarely read and even more rarely taught in the classroom.<sup>iv</sup> A few of her late works remain unpublished, and the ones that are published are almost impossible to find in a bookstore. Rich’s more traditional early work, on the other hand, was praised in the second way. W.H. Auden wrote the introduction to her first book of poems, and in it he wrote that her poems “are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs.”<sup>v</sup> Although these two forms of criticism are very different, both make the assumption that writing is a masculine activity. “Woman” is presented as one category, characterized by “modesty,” passivity, and quietness, and “writer” is a very separate category, characterized by assertion and strength. As Ostriker puts it, women writers have to deal with “the awareness that *true writer* signifies assertion while *true woman* signifies submission” (6). The individual who is both “woman” and “writer” is therefore expected to be two different people at once—to have two separate identities.

Both H.D. and Adrienne Rich express this feeling of division within themselves. Both felt that there was some disconnect between their identity as a writer and their identity as a woman, and in their published work and in private journals and letters they both expressed a desire to unify those divisions. Because they blame that division on the assumption that writing is a form of “fathering,” both authors try to reconcile that division by imagining writing as a form of “mothering.” Susan Friedman writes of this

strategy in “Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse.”

[t]he association of the pen and paintbrush with the phallus in metaphors of creativity has resulted in an "anxiety of authorship" for aspiring women writers: to wield a pen is a masculine act that puts the woman writer at war with her body and her culture. In contrast to the phallic analogy that implicitly excludes women from creativity, the childbirth metaphor validates women's artistic efforts by unifying their mental and physical labor into (pro)creativity.” (49)

They are certainly not the first or only authors to use this metaphor for literary creation; the link between artistic creativity and procreation has been made since Sidney, Shakespeare, and Pope.<sup>vi</sup> Many contemporary feminist critics and poets, such as Helene Cixous, Stephanie Mines, and Sharon Olds, have embraced this metaphor. Just as Emerson linked authorship with male sexuality through the metaphor of ejaculation, Cixous links authorship with female sexuality through the metaphor of childbirth; she describes “the gestation drive” as “just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for a swollen belly, for language, for blood.”<sup>vii</sup> She writes that the woman “writes in white ink,” just like Emerson’s male poet who writes in seminal fluid; but Cixous suggests that the white ink of the female poet is breast milk (339). It is important to note, however, that this metaphor is by no means inherently feminist. It has been used in many different ways with many different agendas, sometimes to suggest that writing is a *masculine* form of mental childbirth comparable to feminine physical childbirth. Seamus Heaney compared his experience of writing poetry to motherhood, writing that his “poems came out of something passive, brooding, womb-like.”<sup>viii</sup> He

asserts that he is basing his distinction between mothering language and fathering language on the “biological facts of siring and mothering,” because “[o]ne is a forced entry, as it were, and the other is a suffered consequence” (104). That is, he indicates that writing poetry was a passive pursuit, a “matter of waiting,” and therefore it was comparable to motherhood (104). By others, it has been suggested that writing is an alternative form of motherhood that women can have access to, but only in place of and not in combination with actual motherhood. Margaret Homans discusses this phenomenon in *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women’s Writing*.

H.D. and Rich grapple with these two pervasive metaphors of authorship—writing as fatherhood and writing as motherhood—in their attempt to reconcile their own identities. Moreover, although both poets felt the division between woman and writer on a personal level, they recognized that all of these concepts are bound up with culture. Our perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood are created in large part by our culture, and so in order to re-imagine authorship in those terms, H.D. and Rich have to contend with the cultural systems that have defined those terms. Ostriker writes that “For many women writers, the quest to re-integrate a split self is simultaneously a drive to topple the hierarchy of the sacred and the profane, redeeming and including what the culture has exiled and excluded” (*Stealing the Language* 195-196). That is, woman and writer have come to be defined as distinct categories by cultural narratives or “norms” that teach us what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a writer. Therefore, in order to unify their identities, women writers have to take on and try to alter the whole cultural system of which they are a part. In the feminist movement, it is commonly said that “the



personal is political.” Although H.D. predates that phrase, it is very much at work in her writing and even more overtly in Rich’s writing. They both suggest that the personal struggle to find union within themselves is also a political and cultural struggle. In order to re-integrate their split selves, they have to take on monolithic cultural narratives and reinterpret them or retranslate them in new ways that allow them to be both woman and writer at once.

In doing so, they become part of an ongoing history of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist authors and critics who are engaged in reinterpreting and reconstructing patriarchal myths. These women recognize that, as Angela Carter puts it, “language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”<sup>ix</sup> It is through the language of patriarchal cultural myths that women have been defined as marginal, and it is by altering and reinventing that language that women can free themselves from the marginality ascribed by those myths. Angela Carter describes this kind of reinterpretation nicely as the “demythologizing business” (74). In “Notes from the Front Line,” she writes, “I feel free to loot and rummage in an official past, specifically a literary past...It is a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be a la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based” (74). This is precisely what H.D. and Rich do in their quest to re-integrate split identities; they “loot and rummage” in an official or canonical literary past, taking what they find useful to them and discarding everything else. From those bits and pieces, they deconstruct the “lies” of patriarchal culture and reconstruct a new feminist mythology in which “true woman” and “true writer” do not have conflicting definitions.

It is important to note that both authors are operating primarily from the biblically based Judeo-Christian tradition. H.D. was brought up in a practicing Moravian Christian family and was well-educated in the Christian bible, and Rich came from a Jewish family. This is significant to their use of these motherhood and fatherhood metaphors for authorship, because specific religious beliefs contribute to and influence the cultural meanings of motherhood and fatherhood. The Judeo-Christian story of origin indicates that the world was born out of a man's mind and his power over language—what God *said* became reality. The mother's role is secondary; Eve is created from Adam's rib to be his helper, and her labor is to reproduce the creation of God by means of her body. She is not involved in any original creation. Instead, creativity is solely the role of the masculine God. This concept is echoed in the story of the birth of Christ, in which Mary bears forth the Word of God in the form of the baby Jesus. She is not the true parent of Christ or the author of the Word he represents; she is merely the vessel through which he becomes flesh. Significantly, both H.D. and Rich also draw heavily from Greek mythology and literature, thus engaging with the Greek story of origin that contrasts with the Judeo-Christian myth. In Greek myth, the mother figure, Gaia or mother Earth, is the original creator of the universe rather than the re-creator of a masculine creation. Susan Friedman explains the literary significance of this:

[t]he Christian tradition built on the masculine monotheism of Judaism by appropriating the power of the Word for a masculine deity and his son. In the worship of ancient near-Eastern goddesses such as Inanna, Isis, and Demeter, woman's physical capacity to give birth served as the paradigm of all origins. But where God the Father supplanted the Goddess as Mother, the mind became the

symbolic womb of the universe. According to the gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made.” The power of the Word became the paradigm of male creativity, indeed the foundation of Western patriarchal ideology. (“Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor” 53)

This is the context from which H.D. and Rich are reinterpreting culture. It is also important to note that while both authors sometimes present classical cultural values as an alternative to patriarchal Judeo-Christian beliefs, they also suggest that at times, classical cultures were oppressive towards women as well and similarly need to be reinterpreted or re-imagined.

Comparing these two poets side by side reveals an interesting progression. Both H.D. and Rich undertake the reintegration of their identities in a cyclical manner. They use their poetry to re-imagine the figure of the mother, and they use the revised mother figure as a way to re-imagine their identities as poets. However, the structure of this re-imagining is different for each poet. H.D. re-imagines the mother as androgynous, and uses the image of the androgynous mother as a paradigm through which to reconcile the masculine and feminine sides of herself. Rich does not imagine the mother as androgynous; instead, she suggests that both the mother and the female poet can claim power by subverting patriarchal cultural myths. In this way, H.D. reintegrates her identity through a unification of motherhood and fatherhood, while Rich reintegrates her identity through a unification of the mother with herself.

“Possibly we will reach haven, heaven.” The Unification of Motherhood and  
Fatherhood in H.D.’s *Trilogy*

Hilda Doolittle was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and moved to Philadelphia as a young child. She was the favorite child of her father, a professor of astronomy at Lehigh University, who encouraged her to read and to excel in science. H.D.’s relationship with her mother, Helen Wolle Doolittle, was characterized by ambivalence. Helen, who taught music at her father’s Moravian seminary when H.D. was a young child and who was an accomplished musician and painter, represented artistic expression to Hilda. However, Helen stopped teaching music when Hilda was eight years old and never pursued an artistic career in order to support her husband’s career and raise her children.<sup>x</sup> H.D. felt great anger toward this “morbidly self-effacing” woman who gave up her potential to create great art in order to fulfill a “normal” feminine destiny, overtly favored H.D.’s brother Gilbert, and denied the possibility that her young daughter was gifted enough to achieve artistic greatness (141). However, H.D. also idealized her mother as her artistic predecessor; in *Tribute to Freud*, she wrote, “Obviously, this is my inheritance. I derive my imaginative faculties through my musician-artist mother” (121). H.D. wanted to look to her mother as a source of artistic inspiration, but was frustrated by her mother’s willingness to suppress her artistic desires in order to fulfill a culturally mandated feminine role.

Even as a child, she felt a division between two different parts of her identity, and this awareness only increased throughout her life. In *Tribute to Freud*, she wrote that she experienced a “schism of consciousness” caused by all of the “two’s and two’s and two’s in my life” (31-33). She felt torn between her mother’s art, which her mother

discouraged her from pursuing, and her father's science, which her father encouraged her to pursue, but in which she did not excel. She felt that the tug-of-war between the two made her fail at both. She felt this division in her gender identity as well: Freud told her, and she related to Bryher in a letter, that she "had two things to hide, one that you were a girl, the other that you were a boy."<sup>xi</sup> She also felt this division in her identity as a writer. On the one hand, she associated art with her mother; this art, however, was always thwarted or unsuccessful. On the other hand, she associated authorship or creativity with masculinity or fatherhood. She wrote in a letter to Bryher from 1933, "I keep dreaming of literary men, Shaw, Cunningham, Grahame, now Noel Coward and Lawrence himself, over and over. It is important as book means *penis* evidently and as a 'writer,' only, am I equal in uc-n [unconscious], in the right way with men" (*Psyche Reborn*, 37). She was haunted both by failed feminine creativity and by successful masculine creativity. In this way, her sexual identity and her literary identity were divided between male and female, father and mother, and she felt that unless she could reconcile the two, she must fail at both.

It is impossible to discuss H.D.'s views and anxieties about motherhood and poetry without addressing her relationship with Sigmund Freud. H.D. was a student, patient, and personal friend of Freud's, and her views on what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a writer were heavily influenced by her extensive interaction with him. In fact, H.D. came to Freud in the hope of reconciling the two distinct parts of her identity; she wrote in her journal, "I am on the fringes or in the penumbra of the light of my father's science and my mother's art—the psychology or philosophy of Sigmund Freud" (*Psyche Reborn*, 153). (It is interesting that H.D. classifies Freudian theory as

somewhere between science and art. Although Freud would certainly have classified himself as a scientist, his theories are now more often viewed as artistic creations or fictions.) Freud and H.D. worked together as analyst and analysand extensively, meeting five days a week for nearly four months beginning in March of 1933, and again on a daily basis for five weeks in October of 1934. Their sessions were then interrupted by the spread of Nazism and threat of war. Although they never resumed regular psychoanalytic sessions, they exchanged letters throughout the rest of Freud's life.<sup>xiii</sup> There developed between the two a very, as H.D. called it, "tender" relationship. H.D. was not just Freud's analysand but his *student*, and he was not just her analyst but her *professor*, whom she referred to as "Papa." Later in their relationship, she came to think of herself as his disciple who would "carry on the torch" of psychoanalysis after him. After she stopped working directly with Freud, she continued her "training" in psychoanalysis with the British psychoanalyst Walter Schmideberg from 1936 to 1937, and with her lifelong friend Erich Heydt on and off beginning in 1953 (20-22).

Early in their relationship, H.D. looked to Freud as something of a prophet, with access to almost supernatural visions. She credited him with the ability to see and understand the deeply rooted causes behind the workings of the human psyche. She believed his "vision" could heal psychological trauma, and to H.D., who was deeply traumatized by World Wars I and II, Freud was a kind of savior for the war-torn human race. In a letter to Bryher in March of 1933, at the very beginning of her sessions with him, H.D. explicitly describes Freud as a savior:

I wish he had a thousand lives and arms and brains...The world is literally his 'child.'...Freud is simply Jesus-Christ after the resurrection, he has that wistful

ghost look of someone who has been right past the door of the tomb, and such tenderness with such humor, he just IS all that. I am sure he IS the absolute inheritor of all that eastern mystery and majic, just IS, in spite of all his monumental work and all that, he is the real, the final healer (19).

She represents him as a father figure (“the world is literally his ‘child’”) as well as a redeemer (“Freud is simply Jesus-Christ after the resurrection”). H.D. saw Freud as a (or possibly *the*) healer based on his ability to see the true meaning behind psychological symbols and signs. However, Freud’s theories defined several aspects of H.D. as wounds or abnormalities, and H.D. became more and more aware of and uncomfortable with this as their relationship progressed.

Freud’s theory of psychosexual development describes his understanding of the way that children develop (or fail to develop) into heterosexual adults. In his lecture on “Femininity,” Freud writes, “With their entry into the phallic phase the differences between the sexes are completely eclipsed by their agreements...the little girl is a little man.”<sup>xiii</sup> Like the little boy who learns to derive pleasure from his penis, the little girl has learned to derive pleasure from her clitoris, which Freud refers to as her “penis-equivalent” in opposition to the “truly feminine vagina” (582). Moreover, the first “love-object” of both the little boy and little girl is the mother, the first person to provide all of their basic physical and emotional needs (582). This love is interrupted when young children first discover anatomical sex differences; the knowledge of female genitalia causes the little boy to fear that he too could be “castrated” and leads him to give up his love for his “castrated” mother for the protection of his phallic (i.e. powerful) father. Because of this fear of castration, the boy is forced to differentiate himself from the

mother and therefore develops a strong superego. Eventually, he will find a replacement for the lack of his mother through a heterosexual marriage, and will play the role of the father in the Oedipal drama (331).

The process for girls, however, is much more complicated, according to Freud. When young girls are first exposed to male anatomy, Freud suggests that they immediately feel a sense of inferiority:

They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance, too. They feel seriously wronged, often declare that they want to "have something like it too," and fall victim to "envy for the penis," which will leave ineradicable traces on their development and the formation of their character and which will not be surmounted in even the most favorable cases without a severe expenditure of psychical energy. (589)

Freud calls this moment in a girl's life "the discovery that she is castrated." That is, he suggests that the discovery of sex differences inevitably signifies to a girl that she is deficient or lacking. This lack will define her development into mature femininity, as the young girl gives up her active, "masculine" tendencies for passive ones and comes to accept her biologically determined inferiority. Freud describes the process: "Her self-love is mortified by the comparison with the boy's far superior equipment and in consequence she renounces her masturbatory satisfaction from her clitoris, repudiates her love for her mother and...represses a good part of her sexual trends in general...Passivity now has the upper hand" (590). Like the little boy, the girl turns away from her "castrated" mother toward her phallic father, but for different reasons. Angry with her mother for failing to give her a penis, she hopes to obtain one from her father.



However, Freud states that the “feminine situation is only established...if a baby takes the place of a penis in accordance with an ancient symbolic equivalence” (592). That is, the development of mature, “normal” femininity is defined by the acceptance of inferiority and lack, and the sublimation of the wish for so-called phallic power into the wish for maternity. The baby is figured as a way in which the woman bears phallic power through her body, and Freud describes this transmission of power as the most fulfillment a woman can hope for, “especially so if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him” (592). Freud suggests that women transfer this “wish for a penis-baby” onto their fathers, creating an Oedipus complex in which the girl is the rival of the mother, “who receives from the father everything that [the daughter] desires from him” (593). While boys overcome the Oedipus complex through their fear of castration and resultant identification with their fathers, girls who are “already castrated” do not have any impetus to overcome the complex. Thus, Freud suggests, women remain in this state “for an indeterminate length of time; they demolish it late and even so, incompletely.” As a result, Freud writes that “the formation of the super-ego must suffer; it cannot attain the strength and independence which give it its cultural significance” (593). That is, women’s long-lasting penis envy, which results from their “castration,” hinders their development of a superego and a subsequent sense of morality and justice, and limits their satisfaction in life to the vicarious association with the phallus of their husbands and the bearing of the father’s “penis-child.” Freud suggests that women are defined by envy of the phallus and their desire to obtain it, and in this way are propelled to motherhood by their *lack*.

In this way, women are defined as “wounded” by Freud; they are defined by their physical and symbolic lack. Moreover, women who do not accept this inferiority and continue, in Freud’s terms, to try to claim phallic power throughout their lives are defined as “abnormal.” This failure to accept femininity could be expressed as the desire to create art, to write, or to hold a traditionally masculine profession. Indeed, Freud suggests that many women come to psychoanalysis in the hopes of healing their so-called castration: “The wish to get the longed-for penis eventually in spite of everything may contribute to the motives that drive a mature women to analysis, and what she may reasonably expect from analysis -- a capacity, for instance, to carry on an intellectual profession -- may often be recognized as a sublimated modification of this repressed wish” (589). That is, Freud suggests that women turn to psychoanalysis with the desire for a penis, and in lieu of that prize, they gain some degree of phallic power in an intellectual profession. This failure to accept the lack of the phallus is also expressed in what Freud referred to as a “mother-fixation”. The woman who does not accept her biological inferiority, he speculates, never fully transfers her affections to the father figure, and thus remains attached to the mother in hopes of someday obtaining the phallus that is required in order to be her love object. This desire is expressed in homosexual desires, and Freud described H.D.’s relationships with women in these terms.

Thus, both H.D.’s gender and her sexuality are defined by Freud as “wounds.” Being female is defined as being castrated, and being bisexual is defined as a failure to develop normally into adulthood. This representation of women as inherently “wounded” or deficient led many feminists during Freud’s lifetime and after to criticize him and reject his theories as the products of patriarchal culture. Freud rejected the criticisms of

feminists outright, stating, “The feminist demand for equal rights between the sexes does not carry far here; the morphological difference must express itself in differences in the development of the mind. ‘Anatomy is Destiny,’ to vary a saying of Napoleon’s.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Despite her personal attachment to him, H.D. also criticized Freud’s belief in the biologically determined inferiority of women. Far from passively accepting her inferior “anatomical destiny,” H.D. argued with the “dear” man she referred to as “Papa.”

(*Psyche Reborn* 127) Although she rarely criticized him publicly, ostensibly because of her personal relationship with him, in her posthumously published poem “The Master,” she expresses not only criticism but anger: “I was angry with the old man/ with his talk of man-strength,/ I was angry with his mystery, his mysteries,/ I argued till day-break.”<sup>xv</sup>

Specifically, H.D. found fault with Freud’s belief—a belief that echoes throughout history—that woman and artist are irreconcilable identities. H.D. wrote in her journal in March of 1933: “I was rather annoyed with the Professor in one of his volumes. He said (as I remember) that women did not creatively amount to anything or amount to much, unless they had a male counterpart or a male companion from whom they drew their inspiration.” (*Tribute to Freud* 149) He defines creative inspiration as male, suggesting that the woman artist can at her best be only the transmitter of masculine ideas. In 1933, H.D. was “annoyed” by this belief; she still doubted herself, however, and wondered if “[p]erhaps he is right” (149). In the mid-1940’s, during the conclusion of and years following World War II, H.D. moved beyond this personal doubt and responded to Freud’s view in the form of her epic poem *Trilogy*. *Trilogy* consists of three long sections, entitled *The Walls Do Not Fall*, *Tribute to the Angels*, and *The Flowering of the Rod*. In it, she does not fully reject Freud’s theories, but rather

reinterprets them; she deconstructs his “mysteries” and writes her own myth. Freud is no longer her “final healer” who can suture up her wounds. Instead, she rejects the idea that she is wounded in the way Freud suggests. It is not a suturing up of the wound caused by “castration” or the separation from the mother that H.D. suggests is needed. It is a resurrection of the mother who has been made absent as a powerful creative force—not inferior but equal to the father. In this way, rather than being healed by Freud’s ability to interpret words and symbols as an analyst, H.D. heals herself through her own ability to manipulate and interpret words as a poet.

In *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the first part of her *Trilogy*, H.D. repeatedly asserts the redemptive or healing power of words. She describes words as the bearers of secret knowledge that endure throughout human violence and catastrophe. She writes, “gods have been smashed before...and their secret is stored/in man’s very speech” (15). In H.D.’s vision, this knowledge takes precedence over violence, containing rightful, true power as opposed to the usurped or usurping power of violence: “Remember, O Sword,/you are the younger brother, the latter-born,//your Triumph, however exultant,/must one day be over,//in the beginning/was the Word” (17). That is, words are humanity’s way of accessing ancient power—power that predates and has the potential to overcome violence and human destruction. Particularly because H.D. was writing her *Trilogy* in the wake of World War II, this power of words to counteract violence is extremely important. Through the interpretation of the poet, words are a code that can be cracked to reveal wisdom that can put an end to violence: “I know, I feel/the meaning that words hide;/they are anagrams, cryptograms,/little boxes, conditioned/to hatch butterflies” (53). Using the

image of butterflies as a symbol of rebirth or resurrection, H.D. suggests that words are the path to rebirth after the destruction caused by war and violence.

Because of the power held in language, the poet becomes an extremely powerful figure. H.D. describes poets as those who “reveal our status/with twin-horns, disk, erect serpent” (14). These are the symbols of the Isis, the Egyptian goddess of motherhood, magic, and fertility. According to Egyptian myth, Isis was a magician who gained her immense power by tricking the god Ra into telling her his secret true name. With this secret wisdom, the power of this word, Isis gained all the power of Ra.<sup>xvi</sup> That is, Isis became the most powerful goddess through her understanding of words as vehicles of power. Through the symbols of Isis (the twin-horns, disk, erect serpent) poets are linked with Isis. They too possess the power that comes from understanding words as vehicles of power, and as such they, too, are “bearers of the secret wisdom” (14). Moreover, Isis is a symbol of resurrection. When her brother/husband Osiris was murdered by Seth and his body parts strewn about the earth, Isis gathered up the parts and reconstructed him, bringing him back to life.<sup>xvii</sup> Through the symbolism of words as “little boxes conditioned to hatch butterflies” and the connection between poetry and the goddess Isis, H.D. connects the figure of the poet with the capacity for resurrection. They possess the ability to re-create life out of death; like Isis, they have the power to “collect the fragments of the splintered glass//and of your fire and breath,/melt down and integrate,//re-invoke, re-create” that which has been destroyed by human violence (63). In “The Echoing Spell of H.D.’s *Trilogy*,” Susan Gubar describes this “magical power of the Word” as the “alchemist’s key,” the secret to creating life out of death (207).

This is precisely what H.D. does to the theories she learned from Freud in *Trilogy*. She melts his concepts down and recreates her own mythology, integrating what had previously been separated by the figurative violence of Freud's patriarchal theories. That is, Freud's theories (as well as the patriarchal Judeo-Christian myths they are informed by) separate women from power, which is defined as masculine or "phallic." She undertakes literary alchemy in order to rectify this situation by achieving unification. She writes that she wants to "recover the secret of Isis,/which is: there is One//in the beginning, Creator,/Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever//in the papyrus-swamp/in the Judean meadow" (54-55). This could be seen as a suggestion that peace will be achieved through the understanding that the gods of all different nations and religions are really the same "One;" the Egyptian Osiris of the "papyrus swamp" is the same as the Judean "O-Sire-is" (54). While this idea of transnational unity in the wake of World War II is indeed very important to H.D.'s poem, there is a second meaning to this union or Oneness: the unification of the mother-father dichotomy.

The language H.D. uses foregrounds her revision of the story of the Virgin Mother in *Tribute to the Angels*. She writes that the "Creator," "Fosterer" and "Begetter" are all the "Same-forever." Instead of distinguishing between a masculine "Creator" and a feminine "Fosterer," H.D. suggests that these two sides of the dichotomy should be unified. That is, she resists the idea that the Virgin Mother only fosters the child that a male god has created, and in doing so also resists Freud's idea that women's creativity is dependent on masculine inspiration. This concept is reiterated in the final words of *The Walls Do Not Fall*; H.D. writes that she hopes this poetic journey or "voyage" will lead to "haven, heaven" (59). This language is important because it specifically combines the

mother-place—the Freudian idea of the nurturing safety of the womb, haven—with the land of the Father—the transcendent, symbolic realm of patriarchal Christianity, heaven. In opposition to Freud, whose healing would involve an acceptance of this dichotomy, H.D. suggests that the dichotomy itself is the problem. From her point of view, healing and redemption come not from a dichotomy but rather from a “union at last” between mother-place and father-place (57). Her *Trilogy*, then, is a poetic journey to break down the binary that figures the father as the author/signifier of power, and the mother as the transmitter of words/signifier of lack. She attempts to imagine a new world in which mother and father can be united in a single figure.

To achieve this, she turns to the archetypal Western mother figure—the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ. By revising the figure of the Virgin Mary, H.D. takes on not just a single instance of motherhood but rather a Judeo-Christian cultural perception of motherhood. As mentioned above, the attempt of the female poet to reconcile her split identity is also an attempt to retranslate the cultural narratives that led to that split, and therefore H.D.’s desire for personal reconciliation requires that she reinterpret cultural narratives as a whole. She expresses a discomfort with the way that the Virgin Mother has been named, suggesting a need to break down her name and re-make it: “Now polish the crucible/and in the bowl distill//a word most bitter, *marah*,/a word bitterer still, *mar*,//sea, brine, breaker, seducer,/giver of life, giver of tears” (71). Literally, “marah” is Hebrew for bitter, and “mar” is Spanish for sea. H.D. plays on the similarity of these words to the name “Mary” and to various words for “mother” to highlight the way in which women as mothers have been defined. The first set of words describes the negative definition of woman, epitomized by Eve: breaker of utopia, seducer of Adam,

giver of life to mankind, but also giver of tears through her sinfulness. This definition of woman as sinner is embedded in the name of Mary, and H.D. suggests the need to break that name down and recreate it: “Now polish the crucible/and set the jet of flame//under, till marah-mar/are melted, fuse and join/and change and alter,/mer, mere, mere, mater, Maia, Mary,//Star of the Sea, /Mother” (71). The first three words, all French, bring us from sea to lake to mother, and then the fourth, meaning mother in Latin, brings the idea of motherhood into an ancient context. The fifth, Maia, from Greek mythology, is the eldest of the Seven Sisters known as the Pleiades, for whom a cluster of stars are named, as well as the mother of Hermes, the messenger god and, as H.D. writes, the “patron of alchemists” (63). Through her poetic alchemy, H.D. will retranslate Mary to give her a new cultural meaning.

Earlier in the text, she expressed a discomfort with naming itself, writing: “I can not name it,/there is no name...I do not want to name it” (76-77). H.D. reiterates this inadequacy of naming when “the Lady” appears in *Tribute to the Angels*. The Lady is a goddess figure most reminiscent of Mary, although she encompasses aspects of other maternal goddess figures as well. H.D. describes her, paradoxically, as impossible to describe. After over 50 lines describing ways in which mother goddesses have been imagined, she writes: “But none of these, none of these/suggest her as I saw her” (96). That is, all attempts to name or articulate her fail, and H.D. instead compares her to a “deep, *un-named*, resurging bell” (107, emphasis added). She suggests that all attempts to name or define in a concise way necessarily leave something out or cannot completely encompass the reality. In this way, she resists the idea of a single hegemonic cultural narrative: if all attempts to name are inadequate, then there is nothing wrong with altering



those attempts and retranslating them in new ways. Thus, H.D. frames her reinterpretation of the Lady not as a heretical perversion of a Christian story, but as a progressive attempt to bring out previously overlooked voices and aspects of a story.

Before the Lady comes, H.D. writes that she had been expecting Gabriel: “I had not forgotten//his special attribute/of annunciator...how could I imagine/the Lady herself would come instead?” (92). That is, instead of Gabriel coming to speak for the Lady—to *speak* her fate according to the Word of the Father—she comes to speak for herself. She is herself the annunciator; she is the poet. Moreover, when she appears, H.D. writes that “she bore//none of her usual attributes;/ the Child was not with her,” and instead, “she carried a book” (97,100). As Margaret Homans explains in *Bearing the Word*, it is not a new concept to depict Mary with a book; paintings of Mary often show her reading the Bible before she is interrupted by the arrival of the angel Gabriel, and after she bears the child, she is often depicted carrying a closed book along with the child. Homans quotes Justin Martyr about Mary’s connection with the Word: “For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the serpent, and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced to her the glad tidings...answered: ‘Be it done to me according to thy word.’”<sup>xviii</sup> However, in the traditional story, Mary’s interaction with language is always a response to the authority of the Father. She reads the Father’s Word, she accepts the Father’s Word, she enacts the Father’s Word, and she bears the Father’s Word into flesh. She does not have any authorship over the word, but is rather a vessel through which the authority of the Father is asserted. Her spiritual worth comes from her submission to the Word—the authorship and authority of the Father—by allowing it to be transmitted through her body.

H.D.'s representation of the Lady could be seen as a reiteration of this idea, and H.D. presents this interpretation of her after she appears. The Lady with the book, as H.D. writes, could be interpreted as "the new Eve who comes/clearly to return, to retrieve/what she lost the race,//given over to sin, to death;/she brings the Book of Life, obviously" (101). The Book of Life in Revelation is the list of the names of those who have been saved and will have eternal life. It is also the bible, the "tome of ancient wisdom" that teaches people about the savior, the means by which they can have eternal life (103). As Justin Martyr describes in the quotation above, the Old Testament Eve brought about death by her transmission of the devil's word. Therefore, Mary is a New Testament Eve in that she brings life through the transmission of God's word. In this view, the book stands in place of the child to denote that the child *is* the word, but not to suggest that the mother is the author. However, this view comes from a voice that is not H.D.'s. This reading of the Lady is spoken by an unidentified "you" who represents the voice of the hegemonic patriarchal narrative that H.D. has suggested is inadequate. This voice, like Freud, presumes the inherent inferiority or deficiency of women, represented by Eve, and (although in this case the Son is represented by the book) suggests as Freud does that women can only achieve redemption by bearing a son. Moreover, it preserves the idea that a woman's only relationship to language is as its transmitter and not as its author. Reading "the Lady" as a new Eve bearing the redemptive "Word of the Father" still figures the mother as merely the bearer of masculine power, possessing no power of her own. This reading does not break down but rather reinforces the dichotomies that H.D. finds problematic, and fittingly, H.D. rejects it.

After the unidentified “you” speaks for two pages, H.D.’s voice returns to describe the Lady’s book in a different way:

...I say,  
this is all most satisfactory,  
  
but she wasn’t hieratic, she wasn’t frozen,  
she wasn’t very tall;  
  
she is the Vestal  
from the days of Numa,  
  
she carries over the cult  
of the Bona Dea,  
  
she carries a book but it is not  
the tome of ancient wisdom,  
  
the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages  
of the unwritten volume of the new... (103)

Her choice of the word “satisfactory” mocks the previous reading of the Lady, associating it with the “dualities that cannot be satisfied” and suggesting that it is inadequate because it remains within that problematic binary framework. H.D. rejects the idea that the Lady’s book is “the tome of ancient wisdom.” Instead, she claims that it is the “unwritten volume of the new.” The Lady is not just carrying the symbolic word of the Father, but rather is preparing to write her own word. H.D. writes that the Lady seems to be “pleased” with her and the rest of the “straggling company of the brush and quill/ who did not deny their birthright,” describing a community of female authors (100). This interpretation of the Lady’s book suggests that the Lady, too, is a female author. Seen in this light, the Lady is a radical reinterpretation of the mother figure, in that she is able to inhabit both sides of the mother-father that H.D. sought to break down. She is associated with Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth, and with Bona Dea, an ancient

mother figure and fertility goddess, and thus is a decidedly maternal figure. However, she is also the active creator of her own language. The blank pages of her book represent her agency to write her own word rather than merely transmitting the father's word. In this way, H.D. radically revises the interpretation of the Lady from a vessel that "carries" or "bears" the redemptive word of men into an autonomous creative and redemptive force. The Lady as "annunciator" at last breaks out of the dichotomy between the active father who speaks and the passive mother who bears forth his word to represent a kind of "phallic motherhood." She unites within herself the literal ability to bear children as well as the symbolic, "phallic" power to author the book of life.

H.D.'s treatment of the Lady differs profoundly from the idea of the "phallic mother" that she would have known from Freudian theory. According to Freud, pre-Oedipal children think of their mother as "phallic," or powerful, until they experience castration anxiety and begin to reject their mother as castrated and therefore inferior to their father. The desire to return to the pre-Oedipal phase in which the mother is "phallic" springs from the delusion that the mother has phallic power and the failure to recognize that she is in fact "castrated" (590-591). In this way, the desire for phallic motherhood is *regressive* to Freud, revealing psychological problems or "wounds" resulting from a failure to accept reality. To H.D., however, the possibility of a phallic motherhood is *progressive*; in fact, it is the only possibility for resurrection in a post-war world. It springs not from the delusion that the mother is powerful, but the actual realization that the mother can be powerful if she is given agency over language. Moreover, H.D. describes this female authorship as the Lady's "birthright." This is in direct opposition to Freud's description of women who do not accept their "anatomically

determined destiny.” Freud suggests that they refuse to accept what their birth has determined for them and, instead, attempt to usurp masculine power in an unnatural way. H.D.’s use of the word “birthright” rejects this interpretation, suggesting that female authorship and power are both natural and legitimate.

H.D. describes the Lady as “Psyche, the butterfly,/out of the cocoon” (103). As we have seen, the butterfly is a symbol of resurrection, and by describing the Lady in this way, H.D. emphasizes her role as a figure of resurrection. However, she suggests that the Lady is associated with resurrection in a different way than the way the Virgin Mary is traditionally imagined. H.D. writes that the Lady is not the “cocoon;” she is not the womb-space in which the savior is transformed from word into flesh. Instead, she is the butterfly. She is not, like Mary is traditionally imagined, the vessel through which the savior is transmitted into flesh. Instead, she is herself a savior. After her description of the Lady, she writes: “*This is the flowering of the rod,/this is the flowering of the burnt-out wood,//where, Zadkiel, we pause to give thanks that we rise again from death and live*” (110, emphasis in original). The “flowering of the rod” suggests a feminization of phallic power, a unification of masculine and feminine. That is, because the mother is at the root of psychosexual development, a new phallic mother is like a savior who makes a new kind of gender possible—one in which masculinity and femininity can (and should) be united within a single person. This merging of masculine and feminine is not a wound like the mother-fixation that Freud diagnosed in H.D. because of her exhibition of masculine traits. Instead, this merging is redemptive, making it possible to “rise again from death and live.” H.D. suggests that women are not “wounded” by nature, but rather by the way they are defined according to patriarchal cultural narratives. In opposition to

Freud, H.D. suggests that the dead, “burnt-out” world will only begin to flower and live again through the possibility of phallic motherhood that she presents in the form of the savior-mother and her blank book.

Of the blank book, H.D. writes that “its pages will reveal//a tale of a Fisherman,/a tale of a jar or jars” (105). In the third section of *Trilogy*, entitled *The Flowering of the Rod*, H.D. writes the tale of the birth of Jesus Christ, the “Fisherman,” and the jars of myrrh involved in his birth. This section embodies the positive unification that H.D. suggests is necessary in the first section and possible through phallic motherhood in the second section. Near the end of the poem, Mary describes the scent of myrrh as the fragrance of “all things flowering together” (172). H.D. then links this scent with resurrection; she writes that “resurrection is...fragrance of myrrh and balm,” and describes the baby Jesus as a “bundle of myrrh” (123, 172). In this way, H.D. solidifies the connection between unification and resurrection, and suggests the Lady’s “unwritten volume of the new” expresses this possibility of redemption. Indeed, as the title suggests, the story that is written in the Lady’s book is one of resurrection achieved through unification—the unification of masculine and feminine that the mother-savior Lady makes possible. This unification is particularly evident in the stories of two characters: Mary Magdalene and Kaspar the merchant.

The first character associated with myrrh in the text is “this other Mary,” Mary Magdalene, who enters the booth of Kaspar the merchant and demands his “priceless, unobtainable-elsewhere” jar of myrrh. She appears with her hair unveiled, which Kaspar thinks is “hardly decent,” and says “through my will and power,/Mary shall be myrrh...I shall be Mary-myrrh” (135). That is, through her own autonomous claiming of a

traditionally masculine kind of power, she will gain access to resurrection, represented by myrrh. Kaspar is initially offended by her presence, thinking, “it was unseemly that a woman/appear disordered, disheveled; // it was unseemly that a woman/appear at all” (137). She neglects traditional expectations of women by appearing unveiled and refusing to leave at the request of a man; she neglects traditional feminine traits of submission and modesty to assert her “will and power.” She says, “*I am Mary, though melted away, I shall be a tower*” (138, emphasis in original). Playing off the similarity of her last name to “Magdala,” meaning tower, H.D. suggests that through her will Mary will overcome the cultural order that tries to silence her or exclude her voice—as she puts it—to melt her away. The phallic nature of the symbol she chooses, the tower, suggests that Mary is claiming the rod for herself in accordance with the title of the section. Indeed, she is successful in obtaining the myrrh through her “will and power,” and in this way represents redemption via the unification of masculine and feminine. She is described as “incense-flower of the incense-tree,” and through her claiming of masculine power, the “rod,” she comes to embody the idea of the “flowering of the rod” (138). She is not redeemed through motherhood, or through silently bearing the Father’s word. Instead, she willfully speaks, asserting her claim to myrrh, the fragrance of “all things flowering together.”

The second jar of myrrh is brought by Kaspar to the baby Jesus, occurring chronologically before his meeting with Mary Magdalene but taking place after their meeting in H.D.’s narrative. Kaspar unites the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene in his mind, and upon seeing this unity between them, he has a vision of “a circlet of square-cut stones on the head of a lady” (150). That is, he sees a unified Mary, the combination of

the literal mother Mary and the symbolic speaker Mary, and recognizes this image as exalted. H.D. writes that “what he saw made his heart so glad/that it was as if he suffered,/his heart laboured so/with his ecstasy” (150). In other words, he gets to this image of phallic motherhood, the combination of masculine and feminine, through something akin to labor pains. Just as Mary Magdalene gained access to resurrection through a masculine assumption of willful power, Kaspar gains access to resurrection through a feminine experience similar to childbirth. Thus, H.D. suggests that access to resurrection, to “all things flowering together,” comes from the unification of masculine and feminine represented by the “flowering of the rod” and made possible by the phallic motherhood of the Lady.

In this way, the phallic motherhood of the Lady makes possible a world in which femininity and masculinity can be reconciled rather than separated in a restrictive way. More importantly, however, the phallic motherhood of the poem allows H.D. to reconcile what she perceived as the masculine and feminine sides within herself. In *The Walls Do Not Fall*, H.D. describes an amalgamation of several divine male figures (Amen, Aries, the Ram) who whispers to her just after she has discovered the alchemical power of poetry. He says: “be cocoon, smothered in wool,/be Lamb, mothered again” (30). She is the “cocoon” of the poem in that she interiorizes the language and cultural myths that surround her and transforms them into something different and new—the Lady that she describes as “the butterfly,/out of the cocoon” (103). She is herself the womb-space, the vessel, through which the language is transmitted. But she is also the Lamb, the male Christ-child, representing both salvation and phallic power and authority. Literally, she is the author of the text, and is therefore the “phallic” authority within the poem.



Moreover, H.D. associates herself as the poet with the savior throughout the poem; she is the child, born in Bethlehem at the end of the poem. In the beginning of *The Flowering of the Rod*, before the story of Mary and Kaspar, H.D. writes: “I am *full of new wine*...take care, do not know me,/deny me, do not recognize me,//shun me; for this reality/is infectious—ecstasy” (124-125, emphasis in original). H.D. alludes to Acts 2, in which onlookers say that the followers of Jesus are drunk (“full of new wine”) because they speak in tongues and see visions according to the prophecy of Joel, as well as to the betrayals of Christ in which he was “denied” by Peter and Judas. She also uses the very words of Christ from the bible. At the beginning of *The Flowering of the Rod*, she writes, “*to-day shalt thou be/with me in Paradise*,” suggesting both her connection to the savior as well as the redemptive purpose of her poem (117, emphasis in original). In this way, she makes a connection between herself and the Christian savior, indicating that they both bring about a new age through the word.

In this way, H.D. is indeed “mothered again” by this poem. She becomes both cocoon and Lamb, embodying the feminine as well as the phallic, the maternal as well as the paternal. She re-mothers herself in a way that heals her sense of wounded-ness, and thus becomes a kind of savior to herself. Thus, H.D. turns away from Freud as the “final healer,” as she once referred to him. She heals herself by using her poetry to reinterpret the cultural narratives, particularly those on which Freud’s theories are based, in a way that no longer defines her as deficient or wounded in the first place. She suggests that authorship is her “birthright,” not in opposition with her femininity, but consistent with it, and she asserts that redemption can be achieved through the unification of masculinity and femininity. Through the “will and power” of her poetry, H.D. becomes both the new

Christ and the new Virgin Mary, the feminized savior and the phallic mother. She herself is the bundle of myrrh, the embodiment of “all things flowering together.”

Beyond Androgyny: Reconciling the Mother with Herself in Rich’s

*The Dream of a Common Language*

Adrienne Rich was born 14 years before H.D. began her *Trilogy*, and came to look to the older poet as a literary foremother. H.D. and Rich are connected in their mutual exploration of the relationship between motherhood and artistic creativity, for themselves as woman poets and for women in general. Through her own family history and personal experiences, Rich felt that motherhood had come to represent powerlessness and sacrifice. Her mother was a talented concert pianist and composer who gave up her artistic ambitions to support the career of her husband and raise children.<sup>xix</sup> Like H.D., Rich felt betrayed by a mother who did not protect her from the demands and cruelties of patriarchal society. She writes, “I felt that my mother had chosen my father over me, had sacrificed me to his needs and theories” (*Of Woman Born* 222). Not only had her mother given up her artistic power in order to become subservient to a man; she had given up her power to protect her daughter. Rich rejects the “Freudian analysis [that] has viewed the rage of daughters toward their mothers as resentment for not having been given a penis” (244). Instead, she proposes that daughters often experience anger towards their mothers or desire to separate themselves from them because they “see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted” (235). Rich suggests that girls learn the cultural narratives that define them as passive

and selfless by observing their mothers, who are subject to those narratives and conform to them to varying degrees. Like H.D., however, she felt that the mother had come to represent “the unfree woman, the martyr,” and that this perception led women to conduct “a womanly splitting of the self” in order to separate themselves from their mothers (235). Like H.D., Rich felt the need to re-imagine motherhood in order to reintegrate her identity as a poet.

Rich made this connection between her work and H.D.’s work in her prose collection, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*:

Working together as women...we can confront the problems of women’s relationships, the mothers we came from, the sisters with whom we were forced to divide the world, the daughters we love and fear. We can...stand by and give courage at the birth throes of one another’s insights. I think of the poet H.D.’s account of the vision she had on the island of Corfu, in the *Tribute to Freud*. (208-9)

Rich refers to a vision H.D. had while in Greece with her lover, Bryher, after the birth of her daughter, Perdita. Close to death after becoming ill while pregnant, H.D. attributed her survival and the survival of her daughter to the loving care of Bryher, whom she identified as both lover and mother figure. After Perdita’s birth, they traveled together to Greece where H.D. experienced a vision that she interpreted as foretelling her destiny as a prophetic poet.<sup>xx</sup> Rich interprets H.D.’s creative vision as the direct result of Bryher’s mothering presence, suggesting that revising the relationships between women can provide access to female poetic genius. That is, H.D. is able to “give birth” to her poetic creativity because of the re-mothering presence of Bryher as she gave birth to her actual

child. Rich uses a quotation from H.D.'s *Trilogy* as an epigraph to *The Dream of a Common Language*, suggesting that there is a deep connection between her task and that of H.D: both assert the need to recover and retranslate a lost relationship with the mother in order to reconcile women's relationships to language.<sup>xxi</sup>

The extensive biographical similarities between the two poets have led to speculation about the similarities between their works. Susan Stanford Friedman writes about the influence of H.D.'s work on Rich's in "Adrienne Rich and H.D.: An Intertextual Study," focusing on the assertion by both poets of the need for a female life-giving force to oppose the destructive force of patriarchy. Both write about regeneration in the wake of war; H.D. wrote *Trilogy* in the wake of World War II, and Rich wrote the majority of the poetry I am discussing during and in the wake of the Vietnam War, which she strongly opposed. As Friedman points out, both poets suggest that war and destruction are caused by the dominance of destructive masculine power, and they attempt to recover a constructive kind of feminine power in order to revive a dying world. Moreover, both poets are concerned with the way language perpetuates destructive and hegemonic ideas, and therefore must be continually re-imagined or retranslated in order to bring out voices that have been silenced and oppressions that have been concealed. Most importantly, however, these two poets are connected in that they both turn to a retranslation of the mother figure as a means of survival and resurrection. Friedman writes that both H.D. and Rich imagine a "female principle" that can combat masculine violence and destruction, and she asserts that "[m]otherhood, as both institution and experience, is at the symbolic center of this 'female principle.'"<sup>xxii</sup>

Like H.D., Rich felt a division between her “masculine” literary ambitions and her female identity. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Rich writes: “About the time my third child was born, I felt that I had either to consider myself a failed woman or a failed poet, or to try to find some synthesis by which to understand what was happening to me” (23). She feels that “woman” and “poet” are two mutually exclusive categories, and that to successfully occupy one category is necessarily to fail in the other. Specifically, it is her experience as a *mother* that leads her to this conclusion. Like H.D., Rich feels caught between two selves and feels a need to unify them in order to survive. Rich’s reasons for experiencing a divided identity, however, are based less in theory than in material reality. In stark contrast to H.D., Rich explicitly rejects Freudian theory. She suggests that mothers are separated from poetry and are in effect silenced by the realities of their daily lives. The mother, responsible for the “constant needs” of her children, is silenced by her lack of privacy, her exhaustion, and the impossibility of finding any moment of reflection in which to think, let alone to write.”<sup>xxiii</sup> She writes, “To be maternally with small children all day in the old way...requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Rich’s concern with the material conditions of women’s lives led her to become not just a part of the feminist literary movement but also a part of the feminist political movement—one that, as Rich acknowledges in the preface to the 1986 edition of *Of Woman Born*, has affected a great deal of change in the conditions of motherhood and women’s lives in general since Rich gave birth to her three sons in the late 1950’s.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich recalls feeling as though she was “being pulled along a current which called itself my destiny, but in which I seemed to be losing touch with

whoever I had been, with the girl who had experienced her own will and energy almost ecstatically at times, walking around a city or riding a train at night or typing in a student room” (23). Through the physical and emotional exhaustion of motherhood—Rich recalls feeling so deprived of deep sleep that she thought she “would never dream again”—she loses touch with an active and energetic part of herself. Rich’s quote rings with the language of H.D.’s *Trilogy*; she remembers experiencing secular ecstasy through “her own will and energy” similar to the way Mary Magdalene achieves religious ecstasy through her “will and power” in *The Flowering of the Rod*. This ecstatic assertion of active power is associated with *writing*; Rich felt it while she was “typing in a student room.” In other words, Rich describes how the mothering of her three sons causes her to become severed from an active, traditionally masculine kind of literary power that brings her ecstasy. She feels as though she can no longer be a successful author because the requirements of motherhood have sapped the entirety of her strength and energy.

This feeling that motherhood and authorship are mutually exclusive, however, is not only based on the material realities of women’s lives in the 1950s; it is also based on Rich’s understanding of cultural myths and narratives. In a September 1965 entry in a private journal kept during the early childhood of her sons, Rich writes: “Degradation of anger. Anger at a child. How shall I learn to absorb the violence and make explicit only the caring? Exhaustion of anger. Victory of will, too dearly bought—far too dearly!”<sup>xxv</sup> In another entry from March 1966, she writes: “Perhaps one is a monster—an anti-woman—something driven and without recourse to the normal and appealing consolations of love, motherhood, joy in others” (22). Rich evaluates the assumptions she made as young mother—“that a ‘natural’ mother is a person without identity...that

maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless” (22). Despite her rejection of Freud, Rich was still haunted by the cultural expectation that “normal” women are those who sublimate all desire for self-assertion or “phallic power” into the desire to bear and raise children, and that a woman who is not satisfied by such is a “monster” or “anti-woman.” This persistent cultural narrative, still at work today although certainly diminished in general acceptance, contributed to Rich’s sense that her identity was divided between a feminine maternal side and a masculine literary side.

In her poem “Orion,” published in 1969, Rich further explores the split between her identity as a “masculine” poet and a “feminine” mother. She sets up a dichotomy between her poet self, outside in nature under the night sky, and her mother self, inside the walls of the domestic space. Her outdoor poet self identifies with the constellation Orion, describing him as “my genius...my fierce half brother.”<sup>xxvi</sup> The narrator says, “As I throw back my head to take you in/an old transfusion happens again” (29). That is, when she is free from the domestic space, she can be influenced by and take on the masculine power of Orion. This influence is imagined as a literal influx of fluid from Orion into the narrator—a “transfusion.” In this way, Rich connects artistic influence with male sexuality. The narrator claims this sexualized poetic power, and even appears to overmaster Orion. She writes that “when I look you back/it's with a starlike eye/shooting its cold and egotistical spear” at the constellation with its “back to the wall” (30). Despite her gender, the narrator violently assumes a sexualized masculine power more fiercely than Orion, the “cast-iron Viking.” However, her masculine power seems to be inherently destructive and necessarily at the expense of her maternal power. According to mythology, Orion is a figure of violence; he is known as “The Hunter,”

violently pursued the Pleiades, and threatened to kill every living thing on Earth.

Moreover, Rich indicates that the narrator is a failed mother. She writes, “Indoors, I bruise and blunder/break faith...children are dying my death/and eating crumbs of my life” (29). She buys into the patriarchal narrative that says that women who have masculine characteristics or power become monstrous, dangerous to their children and to society—that true motherhood requires an abnegation of language.

Because the experience of mothering is at the center of Rich’s experience of split identity, her quest to reintegrate her identity requires her to re-imagine motherhood. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich thoroughly explores the way in which motherhood has been usurped, constrained, and shaped by patriarchy. Even more explicitly than H.D., Rich connects motherhood with artistic creativity and suggests that any woman artist who hopes to reconcile her two distinct identities as such must explore and redefine motherhood. In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, she writes: “I believe that a radical reinterpretation of the concept of motherhood is required which would tell us, among many other things, more about the physical capacity for gestation and nourishment of infants and how it relates to psychological gestation and nurture as an intellectual and creative force” (77). She also suggests, like H.D., that a revision of motherhood is necessary to and will necessarily lead to a revision of womanhood: “The ‘unchilded’ woman, if such a term makes any sense, is still affected by the centuries-long attitudes—on the part of both women and men—towards the birthing, child-rearing function of women. Any woman who believes that the institution of motherhood has nothing to do with her is closing her eyes to crucial aspects of the situation” (*Of Woman Born* 252). That is, whether a woman has children or not, the way she is perceived in a



patriarchal society is determined by the institution of motherhood. Simply avoiding the experience of motherhood in one's personal life does not free women from the effects of the institution of motherhood on society, and therefore any woman who hopes to change the meaning of womanhood must confront the meaning of motherhood.

Rich asserts that these restrictive and destructive cultural narratives are perpetuated through language. In "Our Whole Life," Rich writes: "Our whole life a translation/the permissible fibs//and now a knot of lies/eating at itself to get undone//Words bitten thru words//meanings burnt-off like paint/under the blowtorch" (*The Will To Change* 37). That is, women's lives and experiences have been translated by those in power—ostensibly middle and upper class white Christian men. They have been assigned meaning based on dominant cultural narratives that are created and perpetuated by the powerful. This translation consists of a "knot of lies" that does not express women's true experiences, but instead makes them question their own understanding of themselves. It is this kind of cultural narrative that makes Rich feel like a "monster" or "anti-woman" because of her dissatisfaction with motherhood and her desire to assert herself in other ways. She also expresses this sentiment in her prose. In "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," Rich writes: "Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and through silence. Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us."<sup>xxvii</sup> In other words, patriarchal culture usurps women's authentic voices and provides a false history in their place. This usurpation of women's voices is psychologically insidious, making women question their own identities when their experiences do not match with the patriarchal narrative. Rich writes: "Women have been driven mad...by the refutation of our

experience” (199). It is important to note that Rich was highly aware of the fact that people are oppressed based on many factors, not just gender. She wrote specifically about her personal awareness of the oppression of homosexual and Jewish people based on her own background, but she also wrote politically about the oppression and silencing of many different groups of people. Rich was keenly aware of the way cultural myths teach the people they describe how to understand themselves, and thus have the power to affect their material as well as their *psychological* conditions.

Although Rich contends that the use of language in a patriarchal power structure is destructive and can create physical and psychological distress for women, she also asserts that language when used by women can begin to break down that power structure and heal the wounds it has created. Like Angela Carter, Rich realizes that language is “the instrument of domination and liberation.” Although it can be used to oppress, it can also be used to liberate by expressing the voices that have been suppressed. She expresses this in “Our Whole Life” when she writes: “Words bitten thru words//meanings burnt-off like paint/under the blowtorch” (*The Will to Change* 37). Like H.D., who wants to “set the jet of flame” to break down and recreate the name of the Virgin Mary, Rich also wants to break down and reinvent the words that are used to describe motherhood. In “The Stranger,” she writes, “I am the androgyne/I am the living mind you fail to describe/in your dead language/the lost noun, the verb surviving/only in the infinitive/the letters of my name are written under the lids of the newborn child.”<sup>xxviii</sup> That is, her personal experiences do not match up with the narrative through which society defines her. Specifically, she argues that cultural narratives unjustly separate masculinity and femininity. In order to recover these silenced experiences, she has to trace the way that

she has learned these cultural narratives through language, and follow that path back to the origin—as she puts it, “the wildwood/where the split began.”<sup>xxxix</sup> From there, she can retranslate her experiences herself in a more constructive and meaningful way.

She enacts this process in her landmark poem “Diving into the Wreck,” in which she describes a diver going down into the sea to observe a shipwreck. The narrator states that she can only venture to the wreck by “first having read the book of myths,” because “The words are purposes./The words are maps.”<sup>xxx</sup> That is, the narrator has to understand the cultural narratives that define masculinity and femininity and recognize that these are just myths created with certain “purposes” to exclude or oppress. Having recognized the agenda behind the cultural myths she once accepted as unbiased truth, she can use the words as “maps” to the reality behind the myths. Once she gets underwater, she observes that “the sea is another story/the sea is not a question of power/I have to learn alone” (54). She describes the sea as a place outside of the cultural narratives or “stories” that are motivated by power. Instead of being taught by others what she is supposed to feel or desire, she has to learn for herself. Here she can observe “the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth” (54). The wreck represents the damage done by oppressive patriarchal sexual politics and the “myths” that perpetuate that damage. Only by following the words back to the origin can she see the damage that has been done without her vision being skewed by the dominant cultural narratives or stories that seek to define such damage as “natural.” What she observes in this place is the mother who has been damaged by these sexual politics. She writes: “I am she: I am he//whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes/whose breasts still bear the stress” (55). This description is reminiscent of her description of the exhausted mother, who provides

nourishment to her children, but not to herself, and who tends to her children's nightmares to the extent that she can never dream herself. This image also evokes the damage done by a destructive patriarchal culture to Rich's husband, who had recently committed suicide. Rich suggests that the "wreck" of culture has done damage to both women and men, and expresses sympathy with all of the victims of these cultural fictions. Her task of scientifically cutting through the myths to get to the facts is destructive to traditional patriarchal culture but redemptive for individual women *and* men.

Getting back to this place of origin allows the narrator to see that it is the "myth" that has defined the mother as entirely passive and silent, the myth that has defined women who desire self-assertion as monstrous. From this place, she is able to free herself from the effects of those cultural myths and understand herself anew as "the mermaid whose dark hair/streams black, the merman in her armored body" (55). No longer held captive by the "knot of lies," she can express both masculinity and femininity at once in a positive way. In this way, Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck" uses a similar strategy as H.D.'s *Trilogy*: both suggest that by tracing back and melting down dominant cultural narratives, women can become free of the myths that suggest that "woman" and "poet" and mutually exclusive categories. Through retranslating the "book of myths," H.D. and Rich are able to break down and erase old stereotypes and create healthier role models for women (and for men) who are able to express both masculinity and femininity at once.

Rich paints a picture of this kind of positive androgyny in "Planetarium," the sister poem to "Orion," published just before "Diving into the Wreck." Like "Orion," it also deals with a woman who looks at the stars—specifically, Caroline Herschel, brother

of William, who was an astronomer in her own right and discovered eight comets in her lifetime. Like the narrator of “Orion,” she, too, possesses “an eye/‘virile, precise and absolutely certain’” and she too “levitate[s] into the night sky” just by looking at it (*The Will to Change* 13). That is, she possesses the transcendent, explicitly phallic power associated with the constellation Orion, and in this way, she is masculine. However, she also maintains feminine characteristics: while she ascends into the night sky, she is still identified as “she whom the moon ruled” (13). Drawing on the traditional association of the moon with women and with menstruation, Rich suggests that Herschel is able to claim masculine power without having to separate herself from her female flesh. She is capable, unlike the narrator of “Orion,” of possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics at once without seeming to compromise either.

As in “Diving into the Wreck,” this possibility comes from the understanding that sexist cultural myths are just, as Angela Carter puts it, “extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree” (“Notes from the Front Line” 71). That is, they are the machinations of the powerful that are created with the purpose of keeping the powerless on the margins. The poem begins: “A woman in the shape of a monster/a monster in the shape of a woman/the skies are full of them” (13). The suggestion that the androgynous woman is monstrous links this poem to “Orion,” in which the narrator, whose masculine characteristics lead her to neglect her children, appears somewhat monstrous. However, this tone of this statement is not critical of the woman, but rather somewhat mocking and dismissive of the society that figures her “in the shape of a monster.” Rich does not describe this woman as genuinely monstrous or dangerous. Instead, she brings attention to the sexist perspective within society that projects upon her the *shape* of a monster.

The fact that “the skies are full of them” indicates that this is not a special case of one insane or strange woman; it is a systemic condition that is affecting a multitude of women. Rich further attributes this monstrous quality of powerful women to social structure and the patriarchal psyche when she writes that these women are “doing penance for impetuousness” (13). That is, being viewed as monstrous is a punishment for failing to conform to the expectations and stereotypes of a sexist perspective by becoming an artist, a scientist, a poet, or any woman who asserts her voice.

“Planetarium” represents a turning point for Rich; she is able to poke fun at the stereotypes of creative or scientific women as “monstrous” or witch-like, “levitating into the night sky.” She sees that these stereotypes are the result of what she referred to as “patriarchal lying,” or sexist cultural myths that obscure women’s histories and experiences. Because “seeing is changing,” her relationship to language begins to change as a result of this vision (14).

In the final stanzas of the poem, Rich begins to write in the first person, explicitly connecting and comparing herself to the woman in her poem. She describes herself as “an instrument in the shape/of a woman trying to translate pulsations/into images for the relief of the body/and the reconstruction of the mind” (14). That is, she recognizes that she, like Caroline Herschel, is figured or defined in a certain way by a sexist cultural mythology; she is seen “in the shape/of a woman” and is perceived through the stereotypes that go along with that word. However, she recognizes that just as Herschel is not actually monstrous, Rich is also not adequately or accurately described by the stereotypes through which she is perceived. She has been “mistranslated” by patriarchal cultural myths, and needs to cut through that mistranslation to access her truth. The fact

that she associates this task with science is significant in that she separates herself from the realm of myth. She indicates that she is basing her view of reality on authentic scientific observation as opposed to the politically motivated patriarchal mythology that she rejects. She is a scientific instrument capable of observing reality through the myths that obscure it. Her understanding that the split between “woman” and “poet” is just one of these myths and not inherent allows her to claim masculine language for herself. She merges masculine and feminine attributes as “an instrument in the shape/of a woman trying to translate pulsations/into images.”

In this way, Rich figures her writing as an androgynous act. It is distinctly feminine in that it is rooted in the physical “pulsations” she feels as an “instrument” in a female body and “translates” into images. However, it is also associated with the “virile” eye of the scientist and the non-domestic outdoor space under the night sky; it involves a claiming of traditionally masculine power and self-assertion. In the same way that H.D. imagines herself as the “phallic mother” of *Trilogy*, Rich imagines herself as the androgynous parent of her poetry. She is the womb in that she takes in the conceptions of the patriarchal culture that surrounds her and transforms them into something new, but she also asserts her voice and will to create that new product. This androgynous quality is not at the expense of her femininity or her maternal power, however, as it is to the narrator in “Orion.” It is healing and reconstructive. It enables her to access “relief of the body” and “reconstruction of the mind.” In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Rich wrote of “Planetarium” as the point at which “at last the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem become the same person” (25). The possibility of being androgynous without being monstrous allows Rich’s identity as a poet and her

identity as a woman to coexist.

In this way, like H.D., Rich uses language to break down the cultural myths that she feels are causing the division within her identity. She uses words as “maps” to trace her way back through the sexist cultural narratives that she describes as a “knot of lies” in order to reach “the thing itself.” She goes back to the time before these myths are learned and just observes, like a scientific instrument, the facts that the myths conceal. In this way, she recovers the possibility of androgyny, the union of masculine and feminine. This return and re-union seems promising, in that it allows the woman writer to be both a “feminine” woman and a “masculine” writer and thus to reconcile her split identity. However, Rich begins to undermine this notion even as she forms it. In *Trilogy*, H.D. presents an androgynous vision that is redemptive and complete, allowing a war-torn world to flourish and live anew. The vision of androgyny that Rich presents in “Diving into the Wreck” is very different. Although she has seen the myths for the fictions that they are, the androgynous narrator is still identified with the “drowned face always staring.” Even as she paints this image of androgyny, Rich suggests that it is not a complete solution to the problem of recovering women’s identities. It is not sufficient for women to see the reality behind the myths and to use that vision to claim masculine power. In “The Dream of a Common Language,” Rich explores the problematic nature of this androgynous vision and begins to move beyond it.

In “Natural Resources,” Rich writes, “There are words I cannot choose again: *humanism*      *androgyny*” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 66). Rich indicates that androgyny is a problematic strategy for women poets because it does not sufficiently challenge the status quo of power relations. The notion that women can only claim



power through androgyny still equates masculinity with power and femininity with the lack or absence of power. Motherhood and femininity are not described as inherently powerful. Instead, they are figured as powerful only as long as they are attached to or associated with masculine power. Although the androgynous mother can claim traditionally masculine power for herself in a way that the traditional mother cannot, the trope does not change the fact that masculinity is equated with power, and femininity is equated with lack of power. Moreover, Rich refers to women who are given some access to masculine power as “token women,” and expresses serious wariness toward the conditional power they claim.<sup>xxx</sup> She defines this as “the false power which masculine society offers to a few women, on condition that they use it to maintain things as they are, and that they essentially ‘think like men’” (5). Women can only maintain this “false power” as long as they identify with a male perspective and remain silent about the suffering of a large majority of their sex. Thus, Rich indicates that giving women access to masculine power through androgyny is not sufficient. Instead, she wants to enact a more radical transformation, redefining woman as powerful unto herself.

In *The Dream of a Common Language*, Rich explores an idea that H.D. only mentioned in her posthumously published poem “The Master.” The poem, like *Tribute to Freud*, addresses H.D.’s relationship with her analyst and her reverence for him. Unlike *Tribute*, however, the poem is highly critical of Freud’s theory of women and is overtly lesbian. The poem suggests a woman-centered religion led by a goddess, Rhodocleia, who “needs no man,” and ends with the blunt and unequivocal assertion, “*Woman is perfect.*”<sup>xxxii</sup> That is, woman is not wounded, castrated, or lacking; woman is complete and whole unto herself, and can be divine and powerful without being linked to

masculine, “phallic” power. In this poem, H.D. begins to imagine a poetry that goes beyond the possibility of androgyny. This poetry radically rewrites the meaning of woman, burning away its denotations of passivity and lack and recovering a meaning both old and new that defines woman as powerful and active. H.D. refused to publish “The Master,” written when Rich was a very young child, for unspecified reasons. In *The Dream of a Common Language*, Rich continues the radical revisionist process that H.D. started.

In the opening poem in *The Dream of a Common Language*, entitled “Power,” Rich focuses on another scientist, Marie Curie. Rich describes how Curie continued to work with Radon until she died, despite the fatal effects of the radiation on her body. Rich writes, “She died a famous woman      denying/her wounds/denying/her wounds came from the same source as her power” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 3). That is, Curie achieved fame and success, but she could only do so by engaging in complex denial. She denies both that she is being wounded by radiation poisoning, and also that her wounds and her power are coming from the same source. Similarly, as a young poet, Rich describes how she felt she could only achieve success as a poet if she denied her “wounds”—the difficulties of her life as a woman and a young mother. She wrote: “poetry was where I lived as no one’s mother” (*Of Woman Born* 31). Moreover, she denies that her “wounds” and her “power” are coming from the same source. That is, she denies that the same words that provide her with masculine power as a poet are “wounding” her as a woman in that they are the bearers of the patriarchal cultural narratives that oppress her. Like Curie in the poem, she feels that she will die if she continues to be a poet at the expense of the mother or a mother at the expense of the poet.

In order to survive, she must recognize that the very words that are giving her power are also wounding her, and that to continue to unquestioningly use and valorize those words is to ensure her perpetual woundedness. She has to find a way to create a “synthesis” of these two parts of her self—she has to find a way to write as a woman and not in spite of being a woman.

In “Love Poem VIII” from “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Rich deals with this idea of women as wounded by referring to the Greek myth of Philoctetes. According to the myth, Philoctetes was a talented archer who was wounded in the foot. The Greeks stranded him on an island because of the unpleasant stench of his wound that could not be healed. Unable to win the Trojan War without him, the Greeks persuaded him to rejoin their army and utilize his talents as an archer to defeat the Trojans. Edmund Wilson wrote the influential essay “The Wound and the Bow” about this myth, in which he argues that artistic power arises from a “creative” psychological wound. In this poem and in “Power,” Rich refers to these ideas. Although neither the myth of Philoctetes nor Wilson’s essay refers specifically to women’s writing, Rich indicates that she saw them as parallels of her own situation as a woman writer. She writes that she once felt like “Philoctetes/in woman’s form,” nursing the “wounds,” both material and psychological, that she sustained as a woman in a patriarchal society and deriving her creativity and talent from those wounds. Like Philoctetes and like Marie Curie in “Power,” she felt that her wounds and her talent were inseparable, and one could not exist without the other. At the end of this poem, however, she rejects this myth as a paradigm for women writers. She affirms the need to get past that way of thinking so that women can be writers without being perpetually wounded. She writes, “The woman who cherished/her

suffering is dead. I am her descendent./I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me,/but I want to go on from here with you/fighting the temptation to make a career of pain” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 29). That is, Rich makes it clear that she wants to move beyond this concept of women as perpetually wounded, either by nature or by society. She undertakes the task of redefining women as not wounded or lacking and making her own identity reintegrated and whole.

To do this, she turns to a process of poetic re-membering of the mother figure. In a 1983 lecture given at Scripps College in Claremont, California, Rich stated that in order for women to claim integrity, “we need to know where we have been: we need our history.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Because women’s history has been obscured by hegemonic cultural narratives, this requires a conscious resistance to the narratives we have been taught and an active documentation of women’s experiences. Rich states that women need to “become *consciously* historical—that is, a person who tries for memory against amnesia and nostalgia” (145). In *The Dream of a Common Language* and her later work, Rich enacts this active remembering, particularly in relation to mother figures of the past. This allows her to use her poems both to redefine the mother figures in a new light, and to battle against future concealment of women’s histories. In “Sibling Mysteries,” a poem in which she addresses her biological sister, Rich remembers her own mother. She writes in a conversational mode, asking her sister to remind her of childhood memories and the details of their mother’s body: “I know, I remember, but/hold me, remind me/of how her woman’s flesh was made taboo to us” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 49). Using language in this way, Rich re-imagines as powerful the mother who once represented the “unfree woman” to her, and asserts her own matrilineal history.

In “Splittings,” Rich continues this process of remembering and re-membering. She describes the mother as representative of refuge and “haven.” She writes: “The world tells me I am its creature/I am raked by eyes brushed by hands/I want to crawl into her for refuge lay my head/in the space between her breast and shoulder/abnegating power for love” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 11). Rich describes the mother as place of refuge, entirely separate from power and requiring one to give up power in order to access her. This view reflects the Freudian idea that the mother lacks phallic power, and that the child must turn away from the mother in order to gain access to phallic power; therefore, a return to the mother is equivalent to an abnegation of power. However, Rich suggests that this perception is caused by “myths of separation.” That is, it is created by patriarchal cultural myths that separate the mother from power both socio-politically and psychologically. Because this perception of the mother is based on sexist cultural myths, Rich rejects it: “I refuse these givens the splitting/between love and action I am choosing/not to suffer uselessly and not to use her/I choose to love this time for once/with all my intelligence (*The Dream of a Common Language* 11). By using her “intelligence” to examine the cultural narratives she has learned, she can choose to reject that which she finds untrue or damaging and can act differently. In this case, she rejects the assumption that the mother lacks active power or can only claim assertive power to the detriment of her love for her children, and asserts the possibility of a different kind of motherhood that is both loving and actively powerful.

In her poem “Hunger,” Rich paints a picture of this new kind of motherhood, made possible by a rejection of the “myths of separation”—the “givens” that she writes

of in “Splittings.” She describes a scene of mothers around the world struggling to protect their starving children, and explicitly blames this suffering on “that male god that acts on us and on our children,/that male State that acts on us and on our children/till our brains are blunted by malnutrition” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 13). Here, she makes it clear that she believes that the oppression of women and children is a direct result of a male-dominated political, cultural, and religious system. Moreover, she suggests that this oppression depends upon women’s acceptance of the cultural narratives through which it is enforced: “They can rule the world while they can persuade us/our pain belongs in some order” (12). Further, Rich refers to the enforcers of these myths of cultural order as “terrorists of the mind” (14). That is, as long as the oppression of women is thought of not only by some men, but also by some women, as a natural result of a political or cultural order, it will continue to be accepted instead of radically challenged and changed. She writes, “We shrink from touching/our power...we’re scared shitless/of what it would be to take and use our love,/hose it on a city, on a world,/to wield and guide its spray, destroying/poisons, parasites, rats, viruses—/like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be” (13). Rich suggests that women have some degree of agency to resist patriarchal oppression, but because that oppression is psychological as well as material, they first have to reject the cultural myths that define their suffering as natural.

Rich reinforces the idea that this kind of powerful motherhood is the true form of motherhood by juxtaposing it against “the ‘mothers’ drained of milk” under a patriarchal system. Putting “mothers” in quotation marks, Rich suggests that motherhood is not naturally self-sacrificing; instead, motherhood that requires utter selflessness and

sacrifice is a usurpation of true motherhood, which is naturally powerful. She describes how this kind of motherhood leads women to “self-abortion, self-starvation, to a vision/bitter, concrete, and wordless” (14). Even this extreme level of self-sacrifice does not give the mothers in this poem the power to truly protect their children. Rich describes how “a woman shields a dead child from the camera” (14). Despite their love and their struggle even to the point of “exhaustion,” the mothers in this poem cannot protect themselves from “self-abortion” or their children from death (14). The scene that Rich describes in this poem is global. She is concerned about the suffering of people “in Chad, in Niger, in the Upper Volta” under oppressive patriarchal systems as well as with “hunger in North America” (13). However, this representation of motherhood under an oppressive patriarchal system echoes the way she describes her own mother and herself as a mother in *Of Woman Born*. There she describes feeling betrayed by a mother who did not have the power to protect her from patriarchal oppression, as well as feeling as though being a mother herself required her to completely “abort” her own identity. She suggests that she and her mother are also part of this cycle of impossible motherhood—motherhood that requires the physical exhaustion and psychological “death” of the mother—and that this cycle can only be broken by the rejection of the cultural myths that seek to justify it.

Rich proposes this possibility in the form of the “terrible mothers” who reject these cultural myths of the passivity and selflessness of the mother, and “take and use” their love to destroy the things that threaten them. In this way, Rich goes beyond the suggestion that motherhood should be expanded to include masculine and feminine traits and thereby made more powerful, like the phallic motherhood of H.D.’s poetry. Instead,

she claims that motherhood is naturally powerful in itself, but has been stripped of its power by the oppression of a patriarchal system, and can only regain that power by rejecting the cultural myths of that patriarchal system. In this way, Rich presents a kind of anti-phallic motherhood. The “terrible mothers” in the poem derive their power not from their association with the phallus, but from their rebellion against it. They are not powerful because they are capable of adopting masculine traits. They are powerful because they are female.

In “Transcendental Etude,” Rich suggests that in the same way that motherhood can be re-imagined based on a rejection of hegemonic cultural narratives, poetry can also be re-imagined. She asserts that women need to “pull back from the incantations,/rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly” and enact “a severer listening, cleansed/of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static/crowding the wires” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 74-75). That is, she suggests that women need to listen more carefully so as to reject the familiar cultural myths, the “formulas,” that define the oppression of women as natural. As in “Hunger,” she indicates that this involves severing oneself from the cultural knowledge that provides rootedness and familiarity: “No one who survives to speak/new language, has avoided this:/the cutting-away of an old force that held her/rooted to an old ground/the pitch of utter loneliness” (75). However, Rich suggests that the cultural narratives that a woman becomes familiar with in a patriarchal culture really never provided her any rootedness or comfort in the first place:

But in fact we were always like this,  
rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.



Birth stripped our birthright from us,  
tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves  
so early on  
and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears  
like midges, told us nothing, nothing  
of origins, nothing we needed  
to know, nothing that would re-member us. (75)

Although a woman's literal birth actually separates her from a woman, Rich suggests that a woman's figurative birth or enculturation into a society steeped in patriarchal cultural narratives actually separates her from herself. The cultural myths and narratives that she learns in her culture, the "whole chorus throbbing at our ears," does not give her roots or identity, "for no woman is really an insider in the institutions fathered by masculine consciousness."<sup>xxxiv</sup> In contrast, her education in masculine-dominated society prevents her from accessing roots and divides her identity into two irreconcilable parts—the person she feels she is "naturally" supposed to be according to those narratives, and the person she feels she actually is according to her experiences. Because, Rich suggests, the "chorus" consists of male voices, it does not accurately reflect women's experiences and tells them nothing they need to know in order to understand themselves; consequently, the woman is rootless, "Homesick for myself, for her" (76).

In this way, Rich indicates that the division in her identity is not between "woman" and "poet." Instead, the division is between "woman" as she is defined by the myths of a patriarchal society and poet-woman as she is defined by herself. Rich asserts that in order for women to reclaim their identities, they need to learn to "speak/new

language” (75). That is, they need to claim authorship in a way that subverts the hegemonic cultural voice that destructively defines them. At the end of “Transcendental Etude,” Rich does this:

...*I am the lover and the loved,*  
*home and wanderer, she who splits*  
*firewood and she who knocks, a stranger*  
*in the storm,* two women, eye to eye  
measuring each other’s spirit, each other’s  
limitless desire,

a whole new poetry beginning here. (76, emphasis in original)

In this quotation, Rich describes a series of dichotomies between activity and passivity, but she defines both sides of the dichotomies as female. The speaker can be both the “home,” the place of refuge, as well as the “wanderer,” the active participant in the world, without being androgynous or masculine. By breaking down this dichotomy, Rich proposes that she is creating “a whole new poetry”—one that accurately expresses her experiences and redefines woman in a way that is consistent with those experiences. In the same way that the mother claims power by rejecting the patriarchal order, the female poet also claims a powerful and constructive new kind of poetry through her rejection of patriarchal narratives.

Her poetry is not “new” in the sense that it uses different words or a different language system that is completely original. Like all poets, Rich reuses the same words that the poets who came before her used. It is “new” in the sense that it subverts old language; it attempts to overturn narratives that have become hegemonic and create new

narratives in their place. Women are not the only group to use language in this way; language is a powerful political tool, and many different oppressed groups have made progress towards equality and justice by expressing voices of dissent from a hegemonic voice. Rich suggests that women can resist oppressive patriarchal power by using language subversively, expressing voices that contradict a hegemonic patriarchal voice. In this way, her poetry is both a means to an end as well as an end unto itself. Rich uses poetry to give voice to women's experiences and to undermine sexist cultural myths, but in doing so, she also makes her poetry itself new. The revision of the mother figure and the revision of the poet are intertwined, not only because motherhood can be a metaphor for poetic creation, but also because the revision of the mother figure is accomplished in part through poetry.

She continues to assert the need for this subversive language in her next volume of poetry, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. In "For Memory," she writes:

Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out  
 under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers  
 of light, the fields of dark—  
 freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine  
 remembering. Putting together, inch by inch  
 the starry worlds. From all the lost collections. (22)

Rich suggests that freedom for women does not come from the temporary assumption of masculine power under the night sky, like the narrator in "Orion." It comes from the power to remember, to reconstitute history every day by recovering the authentic voices of women. Instead of having their images projected into the stars as monsters or witches,

women can themselves construct “the starry worlds.” Rich uses her poetry as a medium through which to do this—to describe and assert her own history and the histories of other women that have been concealed or ignored. In this way, she is able to work towards the reintegration of her split identity. Instead of changing herself to match the expectations of patriarchal cultural narratives, she uses poetry to undermine and change cultural narratives so that they depict women’s experiences more accurately.

Both H.D. and Rich expressed a feeling of exclusion from the canon—a sense that, as women, their writing was a usurpation of masculine literary power—and this perception led to a crisis of identity. H.D. reconciled this division by retranslating the mother figure of Freudian theory and the Judeo-Christian tradition into an author-goddess, the Lady. This “phallic mother” represents the productive unification of masculine and feminine within a single person that H.D. describes as “the flowering of the rod.” The revision of the mother figure and the poet rely on one another. The mother figure is re-imagined through poetry as androgynous and powerful, and then this revised mother figure becomes a metaphor for the female poet, who is also described as androgynous and powerful. In her early works, Rich takes a similar approach, imagining the possibility of androgyny as useful and progressive. In her later works, particularly beginning with “The Dream of a Common Language,” she turns away from this androgynous vision and envisions a mother figure and poet who are united in their opposition to oppressive patriarchal power. The mother is re-visioned through poetry not as androgynous, but as powerful in her femininity. This powerful mother figure becomes a model for the female poet who subverts patriarchal narratives in her writing.

Both poets assert that language is powerful, and is not just a reflection but also a cause of the material conditions of society. Therefore, their drive to create new language—H.D.’s “unwritten volume of the new” and Rich’s “whole new poetry”—is simultaneously an attempt to engage with and change the conditions of women’s lives. H.D. links herself with a savior figure in *Trilogy*, indicating that her poetry can actually effect change by altering the cultural myths through which women understand their identities. Although Rich does so in a less mythical way, she also asserts that her writing is linked to the conditions of women’s lives. In “To A Poet,” she writes of a young mother who feels trapped and numb in a house with her children:

I write this     not for you  
                  who fight to write your own  
                  words   fighting up the falls  
                  but for another woman   dumb  
                  with loneliness   dust   seeping plastic bags  
                  with children   in a house  
                  where language floats and spins  
                  *abortion*   in

the bowl” (*The Dream of a Common Language* 15, emphasis in original).

Rich indicates that her work as a poet is directly related to women whose voices are lost because they are consumed and numbed by the experience of motherhood. She slightly alters a quotation from a famous Keats sonnet, writing, “*and I have fears that you will cease to be/before your pen has glean’d your teeming brain*” (15, emphasis in original). In the original sonnet, Keats fears that he will die before he has written all of the things

he wants to write. In this poem, Rich fears that many women's voices are dying—being aborted—because of the conditions of motherhood. She contends that by writing poetry that brings those voices to light, she can enact some kind of salvation. Both H.D. and Rich use this kind of cultural revision through poetry to reconcile the divisions they felt within their identities, because those divisions are created by and enmeshed in cultural narratives. Both poets suggest that by re-writing or re-translating culture, they can change the cultural narratives that marginalize them and thus be re-mothered—reborn through their own poetry as integrated selves, no longer divided between woman and writer.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Silverstein, Louis. "Herself Delineated: Chronological Highlights of H.D." and Susan Friedman's "Adrienne Rich and H.D.: An Intertextual Study."

<sup>ii</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "What Does a Woman Need to Know?" Originally delivered as the 1979 commencement address at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Reprinted in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*, pp. 1-10.

<sup>iii</sup> In fact, Bloom included H.D. as one of the most influential 20<sup>th</sup> century American authors in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. The list consisted mostly of male authors, but included a few exceptions such as Edith Wharton, Marianne Moore, and Willa Cather.

<sup>iv</sup> Friedman, Susan. "Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in 'The Literary Tradition,'" p. 801.

<sup>v</sup> Originally from Auden's foreword to *A Change of World*, reprinted in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, Gelpi, Barbara and Albert, eds. p. 277. Auden praises Rich for resisting the "the typical danger for poet's in our age," "the desire to be 'original,'" asserting that poetry only changes significantly when culture has changed significantly. In Rich's later work, however, she expresses the desire to write poetry that has the capacity to change culture.

<sup>vi</sup> Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," p. 49.

<sup>vii</sup> Cixous, Helene, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 346.

<sup>viii</sup> Walter, Katharina. "'Suspended between the Two Worlds': Gestation Metaphors and Representations of Childbirth in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," p. 104. Subsequent citations parenthetically in text.

<sup>ix</sup> Carter, Angela. "Notes from the Front Line," p. 77.

<sup>x</sup> Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, p. 137.

<sup>xi</sup> Friedman, Susan Stanford, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Woman is Perfect: H.D.'s Debate with Freud," p. 425.

<sup>xii</sup> Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, p. 20.

<sup>xiii</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "Femininity," from *Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, p. 582. Subsequent citations parenthetically in text.

<sup>xiv</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "The Passing of the Oedipus Complex," p. 423.

<sup>xv</sup> Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, p. 121.

<sup>xvi</sup> Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Ancient World*, p. 22, 25.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>xviii</sup> Homans, Margaret. *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing*, p. 159. Originally from Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. A. L. Williams.

<sup>xix</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born*, p. 221.

<sup>xx</sup> Morris, Adelaide. "The Concept of Projection: H.D.'s Visionary Powers," p. 107.

<sup>xxi</sup> The epigraph comes from the final section of *Trilogy, The Flowering of the Rod*: "I go where I love and where I am loved,/into the snow;/I go to the things I love/with no thought of duty or pity," p. 115. It asserts a kind of love that does not depend on cultural expectations or "abnegation of power," as Rich puts it, to function. This is the kind of

love that Rich describes in “Splittings” and “Transcendental Etude” that makes “a whole new poetry” possible.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cooper, Jane Roberta. *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions*, 1951-81, p.175.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born*, p. 21.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Rich, Adrienne. “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” p. 23.

<sup>xxv</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born*, p. 22.

<sup>xxvi</sup> From *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, Gelpi, Barbara and Albert, eds, p. 29.

Subsequent citations parenthetically in text.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Gelpi, Barbara and Albert. *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 198.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Gelpi, Barbara and Albert. *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 53.

<sup>xxix</sup> From “Waking in the Dark,” originally published in *Diving into the Wreck*. Gelpi, Barbara and Albert, eds. *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 52.

<sup>xxx</sup> From *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*. Gelpi, Barbara and Albert, eds, p. 54-55.

Subsequent citations parenthetically in text.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Rich, Adrienne. “What Does a Woman Need to Know?” From *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*, p. 5.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Friedman, Susan Stanford, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. ““Woman Is Perfect’: H.D.’s Debate with Freud,” p. 420.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Rich, Adrienne. “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life.” Originally written for the Clark Lecture, Scripps College, Claremont California, February 15, 1983. Reprinted in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*, p. 155.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Rich, Adrienne. “What Does a Woman Need to Know?” From *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*, p. 7.



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